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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002094

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRESIDENT FACES CHALLENGES IN BUILDING
CONSENSUS ON PEACE PROCESS

REF: COLOMBO 2046

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b) and
(d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On December 10, former Sri Lankan president Kumaratunga told a group of supporters she will return to politics, possibly making a bid to regain leadership of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), currently headed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa. On Dec 12, the Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) announced it would quit the All Party Representative Committee (APRC), the working level group Rajapaksa assembled to build a Sinhalese consensus to address Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. The JVP's move is a symbolic protest against the APRC's discussion of a Panel of Experts (PoE) report recommending extensive power-sharing measures (ref). Rajapaksa now faces obstacles on several fronts in shoring up a &southern consensus8 on the peace process. It remains to be seen whether he will side with his erstwhile coalition partner the JVP and cater to his southern voter base, or instead turn to the major opposition United National Party (UNP), with which the SLFP signed an MoU of cooperation on peacefully resolving the ethnic conflict. End summary.

KUMARATUNGA RALLIES SUPPORTERS:
ANOTHER FACE OF THE SLFP?

¶2. (SBU) On December 10, former Sri Lankan president Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and her brother Anura Bandaranaike, currently the Minister of Tourism, hosted a lunch for 200 supporters in the Gampaha District 30 miles north of Colombo. Kumaratunga complained about her ouster as chairperson of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and said she will re-enter the political arena by April 2007. Many presumed this to mean Kumaratunga will make a bid for leadership of the SLFP, a party the Bandaranaike clan have historically dominated. Rajapaksa was Prime Minister during Kumaratunga's time as president, but she and her brother did the bare minimum to assist Rajapaksa in his November 2005 presidential campaign. Following the December 10 meeting, papers reported that President Rajapaksa asked Anura Bandaranaike to leave his official residence, leading some to

speculate the order was rooted in politics. However, a contact in the president's office told pol FSN that Rajapaksa gave a verbal instruction to Bandaranaike to vacate the premises because the president sought to offer it to his brother, Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

JVP QUILTS ALL PARTY REPRESENTATIVE COMMITTEE

¶3. (SBU) Further highlighting the divisions among southern political groups, the Marxist, Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) announced on December 12 that it resigned from the All-Party Representative Committee (APRC), the working-level group President Rajapaksa assembled to address the ethnic conflict. The JVP's move was a predictable reaction to the publication of a Panel of Experts (PoE) report. The document, drafted by 11 prominent Sinhalese and Tamil legal scholars, is the first of its kind outlining viable steps to address the root of the ethnic conflict by devolving powers and ensuring minority rights (reftel). Some government officials made public statements distancing themselves from the PoE report, noting the APRC still has much to negotiate. The JVP voiced a spate of objections and demanded that the government present the PoE proposals on "radical devolution" in parliament, where the JVP has 39 seats and is an erstwhile coalition partner to the ruling SLFP.

¶4. (C) Prior to the JVP's public announcement, the Ambassador and pol chief met with JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe on December 8. Amarasinghe said his party could only continue to participate in the APRC if President

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Rajapaksa upheld his November 2005 election manifesto emphasizing Sri Lanka's unitary status. Amarasinghe added that the JVP would support the SLFP's MoU with the main opposition United National Party (UNP) if the agreement did not span beyond the terms in Rajapaksa's election manifesto. He also said that the JVP had initially supported the PoE process, but had expected it to focus on defeating separatism and gathering a range of views. Amarasinghe claimed the PoE did not fully consider all of the public's submitted proposals, and the PoE was stacked such that the majority favored devolution. He resented that parties were not invited to name experts.

¶5. (C) Amarasinghe posited that devolution would further divide the country along ethnic lines. He lauded the US model of federalism with a strong central government and national unity, but criticized the PoE report for taking the opposite tack. He said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is an undemocratic group that does not allow opposition in areas it controls and does not permit citizens to freely elect parliamentarians. Amarasinghe said the JVP sought to ban the LTTE, restore the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka, restore democracy, and liberate Tamils under LTTE occupation. He said such a solution would have to include a military defeat of the LTTE as well as ways to address Tamil social and cultural grievances. The Ambassador also noted Tamil political disenfranchisement and the need for language rights and access to jobs. Amarasinghe denied there were problems in these areas, but reiterated that the JVP saw the need for Tamils to have equal rights.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) With Kumaratunga stumping for support and the obstreperous JVP walking out of the APRC process, President Rajapaksa faces difficulties on two fronts in building a southern consensus on peace. It is unclear how much support Kumaratunga still commands. Pol chief will meet with a range of SLFP members the week of December 26 to assess the party's direction. On the JVP front, it is too early to say whether the government will maintain ties in order to cater

to the SLFP's southern voter base. The JVP will likely never agree to the broad devolution measures necessary to negotiate a political solution to the conflict, though if the SLFP and UNP stand together, the JVP has little chance of scuttling such a consensus. With the UNP's support, the government has sufficient votes in parliament not to need the JVP. However, Rajapaksa will probably seek to woo the JVP back into the APRC because of their political weight, while carefully avoiding giving the JVP a veto over the final document. If the two major parties genuinely cooperate on the peace process, it is possible the Sri Lankan government can build a strong negotiating position to present to the LTTE.

BLAKE